

Discussion Paper The State of the Arts 2015-16

DISCUSSION PAPER: PLEASE RESPOND! **The State of the Arts 2015-16: As seen by LALIT Cultural Commission**

The *Ministry of Arts and Culture*'s has a double-edged strategy that continues, until now, to be a positive menace to creativity, the very creativity that the Arts thrive on.

The State

First, the State promotes ethno-religious arts-and-culture, meaning it fosters some imagined "past", in which time there existed "thoroughbred", separate, ancestral cultures, all pure, pure, pure, and that these, for various reasons, got or get "creolized", and this becomes another separate culture. And second, the State promotes tourist industry arts-and-culture commercial "*products*" – typified by the design of the Festival Kreol, projected so as to display an exotic and even sexualized version of Mauritian culture to tourists, who are, in turn, cast in the role of colonial *voyeurs*. Good art thrives neither in compartments that curtail freedom, nor when they are limited to being a product up for sale.

So, the Government's dual strategy acts rather like *an anvil* – the ethno-religious template – being hit by *a hammer* – the tourism product– and threatens to leave any real art squashed lifeless in-between.

And even then when, say, good music, does survive this hammering, there are other meretricious dangers ahead: being bought off by politicians who use you as a vote-grabbing stunt, or by capitalists who employ your creative mind in order to manipulative people, for example by using your voice in advertising a product. There is one ex-MP who prides himself in buying up all the musicians in his Constituency, Curepipe. The former Prime Minister bought off dozens of musicians. One outstanding musician even sang in favour of productivity and the "24/7" work-hours. As an artist, he should at the very least have noticed, while singing his lyrics, that the hours for public transport on the main Port Louis-Curepipe route had actually been *reduced* at the very same time; instead of buses until 11:00 pm, as had been the case for some 20 years, they stopped running at 9:00 pm to coincide with his praises to the glory of 24/7 work-hours. Other musicians play music, while sponsors are sitting eating luxury meals. Some famous musicians have even used children to do this.

Private Sector Control

Control by the private sector has become more pernicious very recently.

While in the past, the sponsors would have a little "logo" in a discreet spot on the bottom of a program for, say, a theatrical production or some other event, to signify their generosity, now the bosses actually organize festivals directly. They run them. Take the *Eco-Bridge Festival* organized by the MCB together with the Jubhoo IRS-hotel bosses. They bring in a downsized collaboration of the Minister, who sits at the Press Conference like a *biblo*, and the upsized collaboration of some supposedly left wing people, like a leading cadre of Rezistans ek Alternativ party. The aim seems to be for the private sector to take over the village of Tamarin lock, stock and barrel, and to buy up all artists and musicians they can pay for, while doing so.

Port Louis by Light was a rather more popular version of art sponsored by the private sector. Its aim was more noble: to bring Port Louis back to life at night. But the death of Port Louis by night was not by Port Louis slowly falling asleep. It was, as it happens, the direct and hideous result of a bit of history: the "*bagar rasyal*". This history needs somehow to be faced up to *at the same time* as bringing Port Louis back to life at night, if Port Louis is not to be resuscitated as a zombie or *nam trene* of some kind. And making Port Louis come to life at night will mean taking on history even further back: from the history of the Company Gardens (what was the Company? Who are the men in the statues erected there?) to include things like the workers' massive hunger strike movement in 1979 there, and the Chagossian and MLF women's huge mobilization at the Company Gardens. Where in Port Louis was Ratsitatane beheaded? What does the slogan under one statue mean when it says, "*Je dois à la France d'être un homme pensant*"? What are the witty narratives related about the statues of the Company Gardens? Without this kind of popular narrative that turns our colonial history on its head, the

celebration can seem like a justification of colonization. “Look at the lovely buildings!” “Look at the big strong men who owned slaves!” The prison being used for art is at least the beginning of the counter-narrative.

But are the State and the private sector interested in doing anything for art, or only promoting *themselves*? The State promoting its multi-ethnic narrative and its tourism product? The bourgeoisie using its CSR money to build up its own image?

All this does not necessarily nurture art at all. It may stifle real creativity. And yet, despite all this, the arts are flourishing.

Yes. *Despite* State policy. But, curiously, not always. Sometimes it is even as a by-product of state policy. When the State tries to promote *Marathi* dancing, for example, rather than “*dancing*”, or *African* music, to take another example, rather than *music*, there are effects that the State did not plan on: the finest students simply transcend the limits of the State-intended arts-and-culture program, and develop their own love for dance as dance, music as music.

Music

And this is how, whole new generations of children grow up to be outstanding musicians either because they were introduced to music by one of the State-funded centres for “ancestral culture”, or *because* their parents played musical instruments – even if it was just background music for bored tourists eating sea-food. The children of these musicians then have the luxury of having access to musical instruments from a young age. And then of course with YouTube and lots of fine pirated music, they are up-and-away. So, there are literally hundreds of young people, maybe thousands, and dozens of groups, if not hundreds, producing music of all kinds, in their neighbourhoods, and for their own pleasure. There has also been a rapid development of self-created sega instruments and even of new sega rhythms. Here we refer to the outstanding music created by Menwar, Kerwin Castel and Kirty Oclou, music which boldly breaks out of the limits of traditional sega rhythms. There is the bluesy and classical Indian flavour of Tritonik. There are the musically adventurous and creative music of Zulu. There is the poetry and folksy of Richard Beaugendre's songs and music, too. There is outstanding jazz, like that completely new music composed and played by the group A4, making a sound both steeped in Mauritian sound and also totally new, bringing together the creativity of jazz and classical musicians with a love for sega. There is a new generation of powerful and innovative singers like Jason Lily, Emmelyne Marimootoo and singer-musician Sebastien Margeot who merges the art of “beat-boxing” and Ti-Frer-based songs in the same repertoire: a tour-de-force.

But music, like all arts, thrives on freedom. And gradually we have seen the very places that young people, often informally, developed their music as youngsters being “closed down”. Gradually, music in open-air public spaces has been suppressed. Often almost by “accident”. When the late Chief Inspector Raddhoa and others like ADSU, under the pretext of “cleaning up” street corners, shop verandahs and bus stations of young people, hounded youngsters off the streets, they have ended up actually destroying the country's main *music schools*. Most young musicians, in fact, learnt to love music by sitting around outdoors, playing informally; this was their Royal School of Music, so to speak. The new laws banning drinking beer in public and thus forcing people into their homes or bars, have had the same effect. Similarly, where even younger children used to play *Zakana*, *Zakana* and other chanting and singing games, successive Government's policies have allowed more and more private cars, cane and sugar trucks, huge goods vehicles, mini-vans, buses, to invade these safe spaces – the streets, alleys, lanes and little roads of the country – and make them totally unsuitable for children to go on playing in, and without any new spaces created. So children are no longer free to pick up their “pre-music” skills in the open air. In fact, it is only one day a year, 21 June – of all times in mid-winter because of our colonial adoption of French ways, and days – that musicians are encouraged to play literally on any outdoor public space. This freedom reminds us of the cruel reality: the other 364 days musicians are no longer free to play anywhere and everywhere. This is what needs first-and-foremost to be changed. Playing music in the open-air should not involve a permit. We must take back this freedom, and encourage others to take it back.

Today, despite all this closing down, music thrives. And now, there are songs of all kinds in Kreol. It used to be just sega and some seggae that was in Kreol. Now, it is every kind of music. From operetta to jazz, from folk to R&B, pop to slam. Lots of slam. And even musicals and a beautiful production of *Porgy and Bess*, interestingly performed in the freedom of the open air. There are formal open-air spaces in Mahebourg and Albion, which need to be copied elsewhere. What is important is

that there should not be a whole lot of bureaucracy around art. And in a country with wonderful outdoor weather, it is open-air spaces that we need to claim or to create, if we want music to flourish naturally.

The State does also offer money to subsidize any CD that comes out, and some funds to any group that plays in a genuine festival abroad. This is an enormous help. It is often tied up in too much bureaucracy, though. Public and private radio stations have also contributed to popularizing local music; but their discernment has not yet been developed to the fine critical art it could become, with this year's *disque de l'année* has been shrouded in controversy.

And all over Mauritius, new places to play and hear music have sprung up. After the *Banana* in Grand Bay, and Curepipe's now defunct *Lari Bluz*, there are *Le Sapin*, a pub specializing in music in the working class area Camp Le Vieux, *Kenzi Bar* in Flic-en-Flac, and another 7 or 8 similar places. And, as the economic crisis hits, and excellent hotel musicians are laid off, they create new places to play – out of need. *Le Sapin* has organized a number of music festivals. And the Ernest Wiehe Jazz Festival has become an annual event for music-lovers.

In fact, music of all kinds has been appropriated by working people. Even the *Conservatoire de Musique* now has musicians with experience rather than restricting its teaching staff to those with *Royal School of Music* certificates. However, with the new means of exploiting “labour”, teachers are now paid by the hour, even if they have to sit around unpaid between classes, and not paid at all, should a student not turn up.

Sega has, at the same time, diversified and developed, breaking its traditional boundaries. Sedley Assonne has produced a compendium on sega and segatiers. An Association ABAIM runs a Ravann School and has demonstrated how to make traditional instruments. Bhojpuri songs and dances have moved out of the private space of traditional women's parties and Saturday night gamats into the public, too. Small groups of people play violin together (some even make their own instruments), while others play classical guitar – also in small groups. Kawal groups play for private parties.

We must remember that music is so important in Mauritius that when the great Kaya, most popular of all, was found dead in his police cell on a gandya-smoking charge, this caused so much anger that a rebellion rose up and held the country at a standstill for two or three days. It was only quelled by the para-police stirring up race-conflict, by attacking two hamlets in the North, at the very bitter end of what was a rebellion, in order to terrify us all.

Evènementielles

Traditionally in Mauritius, other than Government, private entrepreneurs had a tendency to bring over only western artists. But since Immedia, the visiting performance artists have come from very diverse places. This is an important change.

Copyright

It is time for musicians to join together with other artists to challenge the “private property” ideology behind present-day “droits d'auteur” laws that are in fact designed to protect Microsoft, on the one hand, and big pharmaceutical firms, on the other. We need to oppose these rules, and not get into fights with small-scale ti-marsan who sell copies of our music.

Theatre

Mauritius has a long history of theatre, mainly in three rather separate traditions: there is the urban tradition around the Plaza and Port Louis Theatre, two gems of the European tradition of proscenium stages, that produce/d mainly French-language plays for elite audiences; there is the village tradition of “natak” and putting on sketches; and there is the more “engagée” theatre of the 1970s Drama Festivals, the Mauritius Drama League, Dev Virahsawmy's plays, the Port Louis *Festival Teat* organized by Rama Poonoosamy and others, and the roaming theatre and street theatre popularized by people like Henry and Marie France Favory and Mario Noorah, also beginning in the 1970s. Today there is a fourth kind of drama: the stand up comedy. This is very highly developed, and has its own theatre, with people like Micheline Soobraydoo and others taking the lead.

LALIT Political Demands for the All the Performing Arts

Firstly, performing arts must be freed up again for children and for young people to use for music and sketches, as an ordinary part of life. There must be a removal of the repression that bans the performing arts from ordinary open-air, public spaces.

Secondly, every **Village Hall and Municipality Hall must become a Concert Hall** for three or four nights a week, that local groups sign up to use. 30 years ago, the largest buildings in any village were the Village Hall and Social Centres of the Sugar Industry Labour Welfare Fund. With the neo-liberal push, all capital expansion has gone into commerce (huge shops, supermarkets, and hardware stores), immense private homes for the commercial and other middle classes, and great big church halls, temples and mosques. Public spaces, like Village Halls, are dwarfed by these private mahals. This is what Government must correct by investment in halls with good acoustics in all areas.

Thirdly, we propose that all **halls of State Secondary Schools become Theatres** after school hours and over the weekend. For this the halls will need to be overhauled so that the acoustics are good enough for theatre, and so that there are moveable blocks for flexible stage settings. Then all Theatre Groups can apply to use them (and use changing room facilities) from 4 to 9 every day of the week from Sunday to Thursday for rehearsals, and plays can be put on for the public on Fridays and Saturdays. This way, local groups can blossom. Then, they can, if they get popular enough, do a trip around all the SSS theatres, and then end up in the new, and re-done national theatres, like Plaza, Port Louis Theatre and Serge Constantin.

Fourthly, all these **existing theatres must immediately be renovated** and put at the disposition of theatre and music groups.

So, there must, at the same time, be large national buildings for music and theatre, to go along with the village halls and the SSS Halls.

Fifthly, the proposed **National Symphonic Orchestra, National Gallery, National Theatre Troupe and National Centre for Performing Arts** must become realities.

Disgraced former Prime Minister Ramgoolam's defunct unit, *Culture et L'Avenir*, was supposed to have set up a National Symphonic Orchestra. As well as a National Gallery in – a lovely idea - the oldest building in Port Louis, the military hospital. Both projects never saw the light of day. But that has brought us to the visual arts. The President's Speech of 2015 announced a National Theatre Troupe and a National Centre for Performing Arts. All these national level projects must be created at the same time as the developing literally hundreds of local-level concert halls in every village and town neighbourhood.

Sixthly, we must launch a debate to challenge the existing strait-jacket of the copyright laws.

The Visual Arts

The visual arts have developed both within their traditional forms – paintings, sculpture, and photography – and also by breaking out of their frames into bold installations, patchwork sewing, book illustrations, and political graphics. And it is no longer just the very rich “gentlemen painters” of *tableaux* that exist as used to be the case. Art has sometimes even been exposed in outdoor places.

The MGI was the institution that first popularized the plastic arts. The great contributors to this include Moorthy Nagalingum, Mala Chummun, Nirmala Luckeenarain, the Dausoa brothers, and others.

A surge in creativity was nurtured by the linking of the *plasticians* with the rest of the world outside of “art”: *Ledikasyon pu Travayer*, a workers' education organization, helped make this link, by pioneering book covers by artists and postcards of their work. LPT then organized two exhibitions of painting, sculpture and installations: one *Against War and for Peace* in 2003 the other two years later *Against Repression and for Freedom*. The exhibition itself was then transformed into a space for concerts, play and poetry readings and even a conference – each time on the respective theme – and all involving the participation of adult literacy students, as well as the public. Artists have increasingly worked together in groups recently, like pARTage. Others have set up their own galleries, or turned their houses into art workshops. Salim Currimjee has set up an Institute for Contemporary Art in the Indian Ocean that has opened a proper Art Gallery with shows that last for three months and whose aim is not to sell tableaux, and where all kinds of people are introduced to art galleries for the first time.

Increasingly artists like Jeanne Gerval Arouff, Krishna Lutchoomun, Khalid Nazroo, Mario Ng, Nirmal Hurry and Nirvada Malleck have done brave, bold installations, breaking out of the bland content that was typical of previous generations, and criticizing everything from racism to US military

strategy. The Ghanty brothers, too, have maintained innovation in their work over the decades. Stina Becherel, one of Mauritius' finest artists, has sewn beautiful pieces, as well as her painstaking paintings. Henry Kums has done the illustrations for the annual *Tikoulou* series of children's books, which has reached its fourteenth in the series, as well as being a painter. Nalini Treebhoobhun worked with historians and blended cultural artifacts into the very texture of her work. Artists like Dhyaneswar Dausoa, Lewis Dick and Edwin Marie have helped sculpture break out of art galleries and into ordinary spaces, like peoples' yards and Caudan Waterfront. LPT published greeting cards by artists. Many have since then contributed to the *Terre de Paix* greeting cards every year. Jewellers like Ravi Jetsun have taken a craft and made it into an art. Every year dozens of artists – established and young artists – contribute to the Mahatma Gandhi Institute's *Salon de Mai*. And this for 40 years now. Photography has also blossomed. As well as the Pierre Argo views, Yves Pitchen's haunting black-and-whites, there are three masterpieces by Jano Couacaud, *Bor La Mer* on port workers doing their last manual manutention, *The Stone Age* chronicling basalt rock thrown up by volcano activity, forming Mauritius, *Le Temps suspendu* capturing traditional houses, big and small, as they literally fall apart.

And now, caricaturists have come into their own. Deven T. is perhaps the finest. His political commentary, in visual form, is very sophisticated, and is available on the Le Mauricien website, too. Pov has recently brought out a very witty and pertinent booklet *BAI pou Banne Couillons*. Abdool Kalla has kept up the tradition, spanning the time from Roger Merven to the new wave artists.

LALIT's political demands

First public spaces must be opened up for art.

Secondly, there must be an actually existing National Art Museum, as we mentioned has been envisioned for ages, but which is always being delayed.

Thirdly, there must be an independent committee that gives support for artists who are holding exhibitions in the country, or attending them abroad.

Similarly and fourthly, there must be some State support for workshops by artists, and for analyses of existing art – in book form, and on the web.

Hans Ramduth has analyzed the history of art, in his *Art in Mauritius: Post Independence Issues and Perspectives* in a sound, materialist critique; this book needs to be popularized.

And that brings us to documents and history.

Archives

Mauritius National Archives have suffered decades of neglect. Not being either part of the divisive multi-cultural politics, nor being a major tourist attraction, they are allowed to disappear, day by day. Although some fine work has been started with digitizing them, this needs major investment, and a huge project so as to speed up the work. It is literally a race against time. And all culture needs archives. All traces of our past as a country are gradually being eaten by mites. Paper is slowly turning into wafer-thin brown biscuits that crack and fall on to the floor. This needs major investment urgently. It is one of the most crucial of LALIT's demands.

Film and Film Clubs

The Film Club at *Ledikasyon pu Travayer* has enjoyed viewing films from all five continents, often art films, or gems never to hit the big-time commercial circuit. This amazing institution has survived 10 years this February, meeting monthly, and viewing films in the Original Version – with sub-titles. Many other film clubs popped up just after the birth of this one – one at IFM, one at Centre CDMO, one at the Université Populaire, another at the Café de l'Atelier in Port Louis – but they seem not to have lasted long. The LPT "Fim k-Lib" as it is called, emphasizing freedom in its very title, has organized informal discussion on over a hundred films: thus nurturing a fine critical and aesthetic sense in all the ordinary people that participate regularly in evaluating this ordinary yet extra-ordinary art-form.

Recently, the David Constantin film, *Lonbraz Kann*, has been showing in mainstream studios, as well as decentralized, even in open-air rural showings, which were a phenomenal success. It is the first really excellent full-length feature film in Mauritius, and sets a high standard for all following it. It is, importantly, in Kreol.

Literature

Mauritius has a great past reputation in the world of literature. Bernadin de St Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* took the world by storm in 1788, and was one of the first novels ever to become an international best-seller. *A Smile of Fortune* by Joseph Conrad is set in Mauritius. Mark Twain wrote about Mauritius. Baudelaire wrote beautiful poems set in Mauritius. And today, there are many good writers, especially since Independence.

Plays

One of the finest plays we know of in all Mauritian literature is *Tras* by Henri Favory. It tells the story of the workers of Anna, based on an article written by Lindsey Collen after discussing the event with participant and leader, Ramesh Khaytoo. Favory's play sees the story through the prism of the long Court Case, hilarious and tragic, that the workers brought against the bosses that sacked them for inventing a new system of work, which is shown as a series of flash-backs. The play, written in sublime Kreol, also includes music, songs, ditties, and some scenes that include audience participation. It uses a traditional children's "secret language", when the workers' lawyer pleads the workers' case, glibly selling them out. The play has now been published in a second edition, this time bilingual Kreol-French.

Azize Asgarally wrote plays, like *Ratsitatane*, that were very popular in the 1980s.

Shakespeare plays have also been translated into Kreol by Henri Favory and Richard Etienne. Molière's *L'Avare* has been adapted by the poet, Krishna Somanah as *Misyé Peng*. Henri Favory translated Athol Fugard's *The Island* into Kreol, and he and Mario Noorah did a brilliant two-hour tour de force of acting, when he produced the play.

While on theatre, it is essential to mention the contribution of the *Immedia* team as impresario of many fine drama festivals and ongoing promotion of excellent stand-up comedy in Kreol. Before, there used to be the Municipality of Port Louis drama festival that had dozens of plays acted to full Port Louis Theatre audiences.

Poetry

The finest of poems in Mauritius are written by Dev Virahsawmy. His range is wide, from the lyrical to caustic political satire, from love poems to verses for musicals, from the mythological to comments on daily life. He writes in the traditions of both the East and the West. He has written an anthology of poems for children, too. He has also done brilliant translations into Kreol of many Shakespeare plays, with bits that are quite truly as good as the original. Imagine just the title of *Much Ado About Nothing*, when Dev translated this as *Enn Ta Senn dan Vid!* He has added an additional layer of meaning, by the title signifying that the play is a "play". His witches' chants from *Macbeth* are also translated sublimely. His translations of Shelley and others, too, are enchanting.

Edouard Maunick has produced beautiful poetry in French and also in Kreol, over decades, and he has done fine performances, too. He spans the link between the old greats like Malcolm de Chazal, Robert Edward Hart and Marcel Cabon and the new wave of poets we are mentioning, including Michel du Casse, Yusuf Kadel, Marcel Poinen, Patrick Ramdhony, Rajni Lallah, Umar Timol, Sedley Assonne, Tania Haberland, Karl Vadamootoo, Khal Toorabally, Alain Muneean, Aqiil Gopee, and many others. Inbetween were poets like the late Lorens Sofi and Bam Cuttayan.

Other poems well-loved include "Ti Bato Papyé" by Alain Fanchon, as he watches the little paper boat carrying his dreams down a stream – a poem that lives at three levels: at the level of child's poem, evocative of hetero-sexual love, and also posing existential questions. It came out in 55 language LPT edition in 2015. And for the first time, a poetry anthology included a Mauritian Sign Language version on a DVD and a Braille version.

And "Larmwar Mo Mama" conjures up all the secrets of Eshan Abdool Raman's mother's cupboard. In 2008, to give an idea of the number of poets now writing in Kreol, LPT published a book, to mark 40 years of Independence, called *40 poets*, containing a poem each from forty poets. Curiously, in most newspapers it was misnamed, *40 Poems*. This lapse is typical of the low level literary criticism and base-line evaluation that we have in the press. As well as perhaps of the disdain for the Kreol language among the intelligentsia.

The poetry movement around *Les Plumitifs Associés*, which Sedley Assonne championed, though short-lived, was very lively. Today there are poems published in French, English and Kreol.

Fiction

Following on from Marcelle Lagesse, Liliane Berthelot, and René Asgarally, there are now enchanting novels by Ananda Devi, Abhimanyu Unnuth, Natacha Appanah, Shenaz Patel, Sedley Assonne, Marie-Thérèse Humbert, Jean-Marie Léclesio, Carl de Souza, and weird and wonderful stories by Farhad Khoyratty, Shakuntala Hawaldar, Mohunparsad Bhurtun and literally more than a hundred other writers. LALIT member Lindsey Collen is also a novelist. Many of these novelists have been awarded international literary prizes.

And every year for 22 years, Rama Poonoosamy and the *Immedia* team have produced an anthology of short stories by Mauritian authors. Some 600 stories by over 100 writers. In French, English and Kreol.

A Class Bias Changed in the 1990s

Until the 1990s, almost all literature, and particularly fiction, was in French, written by well-off people, either of the bourgeoisie or of the urban elite, and about their lives. But in the past 20 years, there has been a blossoming of work in Hindi, English and Kreol, each cross-fertilizing the other. In LALIT, we note that literature in Mauritius made this huge sea-change from the moment of the debate over LALIT member, Lindsey Collen's novel, *The Rape of Sita*. Her first novel, *There is a Tide*, had already begun to permit fiction to break out of the previous "upper class" ghetto.

Similarly, literature was helped in its throwing off of colonial and class chains, when *Ledikasyon pu Travayer* in 1987 launched the first of five "literary prizes" for creative writing in Kreol. This, in turn, led to the setting up of one of the country's rare literary magazines, *Revi Literer*, which, however, only came out twice. And this brings us to a thorny problem for literature: there is not enough literary discussion and debate, not enough criticism, and evaluation of written art. And this refers to writing in all languages.

Not just on the language issue, but in terms of organizations of writers, there is still a divisive hangover from colonialism. Let's look at one of the ways this happens.

The French and British hold up a mirror to us

Both the ex-colonizers, France and Britain, somehow still manage to show up our weakness. They hold up a critical mirror to us, when it is *them* that manage to organize and produce, here in our country art events that we, Mauritians, somehow don't manage ourselves. Then, because they do it, and often do it well, that, in turn, takes away the need for us to do it. I'll take two examples:

- It was the British Council that produced a beautiful exhibition and book on Mauritian political graphics, called *Upfront and Personal: Three Decades of Political and Social Graphics: Mauritius*. This book featured the best cartoonists in Mauritius, like Deven Teeroovengadam, Abdool Kalla, Roger Merven and Yvan Martial, as well as the fine graphic designers like Alain Ah-Vee, who has created hundreds of political posters for LALIT and LPT, and artists in the group Circus. No-one else has created such a space for this aspect of art. No authority and no collective.

- It is the IFM, part of the French Embassy, which regularly holds book-launches, art exhibitions, film festivals and concerts, that all draw out Mauritian talent and allow the Mauritian public to experience Mauritian artists. Others do this kind of work on a smaller scale but somehow the IFM grandly holds sway even until today, even when France's monopoly has weakened, over culture.

Chipping away at hegemony

But, this is bound to change as artists, musicians and writers group together and work together more. What we need to do is to work always towards more freedom, less censorship, more space free in the outdoors for all performing arts, for singing, for playing any instrument, more places to paste up art-posters, more places to paste up poems. This is our biggest challenge: making the arts move into every possible place and time, as freely as possible. Bring more and more people into producing and enjoying art.

More difficult to change is the absurd government policy that equates arts-and-culture with religion-and-ethnic-community. It is tenacious. And it is by now imposed by a colossal bureaucracy. It poses as something that respects everyone's culture, something that is building a "rainbow" nation, etc. But it is, in fact, very divisive, and then, when everyone is in little separate boxes, we are encouraged to do "metissage" or "fusion". And strangely, this strategy is genuinely defensive. It is what claims to, and does, in fact, hold its own to some extent, against the European-centred

mainstream colonial culture, particularly its francophile sub-current. When Navin Ramgoolam set up his Arts and Culture “Cell” in the Prime Minister’s Office, it produced an annual Book Fair called *Confluences*, which was totally dominated by the francophile current.

So, the separate boxes of art-and-culture strategy, that was designed to face up to the hegemony of French “*culture*”, has, in turn, through State support over some 30 years, now itself become quite hegemonic.

Let’s look at one example of how difficult it is to crack this hegemony. The attempt came from unusual quarters.

When the BJP was voted out in India in 2004, a new cultural policy was devised by the Indian State towards Mauritius. It challenged the communal-religious visor the Mauritian State put on art from India. In Mauritius, they see art as “Urdu” or “Tamil”, “Hindi” or “Telegu”, and this is, in turn, linked to socio-religious divides. The *Indian Council for Cultural Relations*, to make a point, chose to invite, of all Mauritians, Lindsey Collen, to a Conclave of 40 writers from Africa and Asia to share ideas on 50 years since the de-colonization conference in Bandung. They hoped their choice of Mauritian writer would send a message to the Mauritian State that “art” be de-linked from religion and “ancestral language” in their mutual exchanges. The Conclave was an enriching experience, Lindsey Collen says, but when she got back from it, she found it *impossible* to interest reporters and journalists in the event. It was as though they could not get their heads around it. So, the ICCR’s attempt remained well-nigh secret. The press did not, perhaps could not, see the significance of the choice of guest from Mauritius, let alone of the Conclave. And for the Indian criticism of Mauritian policy to work, it had to be public. To be public, we rely on the Press. And the Press was not interested. Such is hegemony. Making the faintest crack seems daunting.

But once it develops hairline cracks, it will take very little to break the hegemony.

And the hairline cracks are everywhere now, so feisty is the creativity in the plastic arts, music and literature. The more cracks the better. The more creativity the better.

This statement on the State of the Arts
has been adapted by LALIT’s Art & Culture Commission
from an essay half this length first written by Lindsey Collen two years ago for an anthology that has not yet been published,
an essay for which she had input from Rajni Lallah and Alain Ah-Vee.
LALIT has adopted and expanded the paper as a basis for Discussion in the Party and in Public.

Responses are not just welcome, but most, most welcome. Address them to:
lalitmail@intnet.mu
or by sms or phone call to Alain Ah-Vee, Lindsey Collen or Rajni Lallah, who guide the Commission,
or hard copy to
Secretary, LALIT, 153 Main Road, GRNW, Port Louis.